New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1945

Volume VI, Number 10. • Yearly Subscription $15.00 • Week of June 25, 1945

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"Oh, Brother!"

"The Wind Is Ninety"

Complete reviews appear in this issue

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS : : : 235 EAST 22ND STREET, NEW YORK 10, N. Y.

"The Wind Is Ninety"

New York Journal-American
June 22, 1945

'The Wind Is Ninety' Opens at the Booth

By ROBERT GARLAND

It is in me to wish sincerely that you who read these words, and I who write them, could sit down comfortably together and talk face to face about last night's new offering.

Frankly, I've small idea whether, in writing "The Wind Is Ninety," Capt. Ralph Nelson has composed a play that, structurally speaking, is good, bad or indifferent. It doesn't matter! What does matter—and matter tremendously—is that he has provided an unforgettable experience in the contemporary theatre, an experience that is tough, tender and, as curious as it may seem, intangible.

Not forgetting Lillian Hellman's "The Searching Wind," Rose Franken's "Soldier's Wife" and Elsa Shelley's "Foxhole in the Parlor," Capt. Nelson's "The Wind Is Ninety"—

Well, quite suddenly, it comes to me that "The Searching Wind," "Soldier's Wife" and "Foxhole In the Parlor" were women's war plays, written by women, while "The Wind Is Ninety" is a man's war play, written by a man. Not only by a man, but by a man in uniform. No wonder the approach to last night's arrival is different. The approach, the treatment and the conclusion.

* * *

Spirit in Uniform

Men, for the most part, accept war as a fact. An ugly fact, we'll admit. But as a fact that has persisted through all recorded history. By and large, women merely put up with it.

The Don Ritchie who, killed in the present conflict, comes home to comfort his wife and children, his mother and his father, believes in the God of Things As They Are. To him, the future is the future, and, let us pray, the peace that passes understanding is somewhere in it. At the same time, today is today, and, heaven help us, wars and rumors of wars prevail and there's no real peace anywhere.

So Don, invisible, accompanied by an unnamed casualty of the War to End All Wars, arrives back home before his wife and his children, his mother and his father, are told that he is dead.

He sees them—his wife, Jean; his children, Chris and Jean; his mother, Nana; his father, Doc—before, as, and after the ill-starred telegram arrives. Even if they can't see him and the wise dead soldier who is his guide, philosopher and friend, they sense his presence. And his presence calms and comforts, bringing its blessing to them, opening their spiritually unseeing eyes.

* * *

Tears and Comfort

Talking between ourselves about "The Wind Is Ninety," that's all there is, there isn't any more. Not on the surface; not in the spoken word. Yet what I've told you is less than nothing, really.

For last night's new play says the unsayable, speaks the unspeakable, thinks the unthinkable, as no war-play has yet been able to. Writing about another conflict and another generation, "Journey's End" came closest to its poignancy. But the R. C. Sherriff play was, at times, hysterical or whimsical. Capt. Nelson's play is neither. Its feet are planted firmly on the battleground.

I wish I'd never used the word "flawless" in connection with a cast. The cast assembled at the Booth is flawless. And co-producer Albert de Courville has directed it all but flawlessly.

Against a superbly, but not overpoweringly, realistic background by Frederick Fox, Blanche Yurka as the dead Don's mother, Bert Lytell as his father, Frances Reid as his wife, Donald Devlin and Joyce Van Patten as his children, and Kirk Douglas as his ghost-companion, are perfection. So is "The Wind Is Ninety," a spoken narrative that brings tears to your eyes, comfort to your heart, laughter to your lips and glory to every one connected with it.

You will agree with me, I am sure.

'THE WIND IS NINETY.'

A new play by Capt. Ralph Nelson presented by the Messrs. Shubert in association with Albert de Courville at the Booth Theater Thursday evening, June 21, 1945. Directed by de Courville. Setting by Frederick Fox. The cast:

Nana	Blanche Yurka
Jean	Joyce Van Patten
Tommy	Roy Sterling
Jimmy	Kevin Mathews
Chris	Donald Devlin
Bert	Teddy Rose
Doc Ritchie	Bert Lytell
Mr. Wheeler	Scott Moore
Jean	Frances Reid
Kenis Sheffield	Dickie Van Patten
Don	Wendell Corey
Soldier	Kirk Douglas
Boy	Marty Miller
Youth	James Dobson
Young Man	Henry Barnard
Second Lieutenant	Gordon McDonald

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
JUNE 22, 1945

'The Wind Is Ninety' an Exquisite And Deeply Moving War Fantasy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I have a lump in my throat and can't see very well just yet and can't remember who it was who said the other day, in connection with some playwriting contest, that the playwrights of the future are in foxholes or somewhere else fighting the war.

One of these playwrights of the future turned up—not in person but in deed—last night at the Booth Theatre, where the Shuberts and Albert de Courville presented "The Wind Is Ninety." The author is Capt. Ralph Nelson of the Air Forces. Capt. Nelson first came to attention by entering a soldiers' playwriting contest and turning out a one-acter titled "Mail Call," which was one of the best items in the set of GI playlets which John Golden sponsored for a Broadway run.

Now, in "The Wind Is Ninety," Capt. Nelson has become a man to reckon with and count upon. His play is an exquisite, almost unbearably moving excursion into sentimentality. In it are some of the qualities of "Outward Bound," "Berkeley Square," "Liliom" and its musical version, "Carousel," and Al Hall's fine motion picture, "Here Comes Mr. Jordan." It is like Harry Carey's "—But Not Goodbye" of a couple of seasons ago.

And it is quite wonderful, coming at a time of year when by all the rules nothing but junk should be produced.

"The Wind Is Ninety" is a fantasy about a fighter pilot who has been killed over Germany who returns to his home, hoping that somehow he may soften the blow the family will receive on the morrow when they get the War Department telegram telling of his death.

Somehow, this captain hopes, he may be able to reach them—his parents, his wife, his two children—and tell them he is still around and will be around whenever and as long as they need him. He is conducted on this return in spirit by a private who was killed in the first world war—a private who is somewhat envious because he has no home to return to . . . except the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington.

The captain does reach them; does give them new hope in their grief; does make them know that he lives as eternally as love itself. He had written them, before he died, that when the wind was 90 (90 degrees, coming from the East) it would bring from him a kiss for them as he fought over Germany.

An Excellent Cast.

Capt. Nelson's scenes of an average home are simply, beautifully and tenderly written. The passages between the departed aviator and his doughboy guide are handled with a restraint and a soldier humor which have immense effect. The fantasy, as when each member of the family remembers the dead soldier as a different person—a little boy with a black eye, or a youth home from college, or as a young man proposing to his girl—could easily become too much. But always the playwright holds it down just in time.

The players are cast with splendid judgment. Frances Reid, as the widow, is lovely, patrician, gentle. Kirk Douglas, as the dead private, is nothing short of superb, and Wendell Corey as the dead flier is no less impressive. Bert Lytell as the father, Blanche Yurka as the mother, Joyce Van Patten and Donald Devlin as the children—these and all the others work beautifully to make a piece of theatre come alive. Mr. De Courville directed, and is most gratefully saluted.

You will cry your head off at "The Wind Is Ninety," be you woman or man. But you will not cry because you are sad. It will be just because it gets you.

NEW YORK POST
JUNE 22, 1945

'The Wind Is Ninety' Says Very Little on a Big Theme

By Wilella Waldorf

Capt. Ralph Nelson, whose short piece, "Mail Call," won a John Golden award and was given here something over a year ago on a bill of servicemen's plays, is the author of a full-length drama, "The Wind Is Ninety," presented last night at the Booth Theatre. This, too, is a prize work, having been honored with an award by the National Theatre Conference.

In "The Wind Is Ninety," Capt. Nelson has boldly plunged into a fantasy about the death of a soldier in the present war. It is a subject so painfully close to so many families just now that the only valid reason for bringing it to the stage is a firm conviction on the part of author and producers that the play has something uncommonly profound and stirring to say about war and death.

Presumably both Capt. Nelson, and the Messrs. Shubert and Albert de Courville, who have produced his play, feel that it has a strong and deeply important message to impart. We find it difficult to agree with them. "The Wind Is Ninety," as presented last night at the Booth, seemed to us a pedestrian drama that never actually came to grips with its theme, but contented itself with patting bereaved wives and fathers and mothers and sons and daughters on the shoulder in an earnest, kindly, brotherly sort of way and saying: "There, there, now. Everything's going to be all right as long as you make your dead soldier a living memory. He'll always be with you if you keep him alive in your hearts."

Dead Flier Returns

Capt. Nelson first shows us Capt. Don Ritchie's family the day he is shot down. The wire telling them of his death won't be along for another twenty-four hours, and he comes back to help them bear the blow. Since it is necessary for dramatic purposes for the dead officer to have a guide and companion—none of his family can see or hear him—he is accompanied, or perhaps guided is the word, by a private killed in the last war who is somewhat hesitantly identified at one point as the Unknown Soldier.

Don's father, mother and wife react to his death by turning to the past, and it is only after considerable difficulty that he finally makes his wife understand, through his small son, that it is the future that counts and that he will be there with them as long as they make him "a living memory."

It is a perfectly respectable thesis, if a somewhat trite one, and it is set forth with a great deal of homely detail depicting Don's earlier life as recalled by his family in their various ways. There is little in the writing to make the play memorable as anything beyond a sentimental, often rather obvious excursion into a dead soldier's past, and the ease with which it is possible to play upon an audience's emotionalism with such a theme at the present time is all the more reason for waiting until a great play comes along to do it.

Albert de Courville's direction is as uninspired as the play, and a company including Wendell Corey as the dead flier, Kirk Douglas as the victim of the last war, Frances Reid as the flier's wife, Blanche Yurka as his mother, Bert Lytell as his father and a number of children perform what they have to do in routine fashion, which is all that is required of them.

Frederick Fox's setting is a depressing impression of what the designer apparently considers a typical middle class American home, complete with statue in the garden and a very wrinkled sky.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
JUNE 22, 1945.

'The Wind Is Ninety' a Poignant Tragedy

By Burton Rascoe

To the Messrs. Shubert go my heartfelt thanks today for the beautiful production they have given "The Wind Is Ninety," by Capt. Ralph Nelson, which opened at the Booth last night. For this is a finely imagined tragic drama, full of tenderness, compassion, beauty, truth and reassurance, which might easily have been ruined by careless casting and slipshod direction.

Before the curtain went up, I had only to glance at the playbill to know that I was to see four of my favorite players perform—Blanche Yurka, Wendell Corey, Bert Lytell and little Joyce Van Patten; but I was not prepared to see them in an all-round perfect cast, which functions as a unit, and never overshadowing the others. The contribution of every player to the evening's pleasure was as important as that of any of the four I have named.

Good Teamwork.

For the fine teamwork in this play, we owe our thanks to that sensitive and resourceful director, Albert De Courville, who is associated with the Messrs. Shubert in the production; and I suspect that it was at Mr. De Courville's suggestion that the following players, besides the four I have mentioned, are awarded feature billing: Frances Reid, Kirk Douglas, Donald Devlin, Scott Moore and Dickie Van Patten. They all deserve their billing. Mr. Moore has only two brief bits, for instance, as a postman, yet, like the others, he was wonderful.

"The Wind Is Ninety" is a play about a revenant, but it is not just another one. It is a drama that appeals to the heart and emotions but it also appeals to the mind and spirit. It is Capt. Nelson's hope, I suspect, that, through this play he can assuage the grief of those who have lost fathers, sons, husbands and sweethearts in this war and give them a thought to cling to which may bolster their courage and enable them to face life rather than be overwhelmed by their bereavement.

Deeply Tragic.

For two acts Capt. Nelson's play drains one's tear ducts almost dry and gives one a wholesome katharsis of pity and grief. (I speak, of course, only for myself and of those in the audience within my vision.) But the third act lifts one's spirits up, believe it or not, by a banality; but it is a banality that is given the force of revealed truth by the sheer exercise of dramatic imagination.

Plain, Ordinary People.

Don Ritchie (Mr. Corey) goes to war as a second lieutenant in the air force, leaving behind him, in an average American town, a father, a mother, a wife, a young daughter and a younger son. He had an average boyhood and youth; he had lost a debating contest in which he had argued the affirmative in the proposition: "Will the Versailles Treaty form the basis of world peace?"; he had become office manager of a factory and married; and he had enlisted at 28. He had won citations and a captaincy when he was shot down.

He is guided back to his home by the Unknown Soldier (Mr. Douglas) whose body lies in Arlington cemetery, because he has a job to do. He had written in his letters that, when the wind is at 90, that is, from the East, it will always carry a kiss he has wafted to his family. All but one of them—his young son—has felt the kiss. He must make all of them aware that he is forever with them by reviving the images of him they will cherish.

This phantasy is all so naturally enacted and yet so eerie in mood that it is splendid theater as well as a comfort to those whose hearts are heavily laden. . . . We all have our intimations of immortality, and Capt. Nelson's is a lovely one, except for one thing: I like to think that those who have died are released from all suffering; his revenant still bears, for a time, the burden of the sorrow his death has caused those he loved. I hope this is not true.

NEW YORK TIMES
JUNE 22, 1945.

THE PLAY

By LEWIS NICHOLS

In "The Wind Is Ninety," Capt. Ralph Nelson is writing of the family of a soldier who has been killed in the war. His motive is high. He is trying to bring comfort to the children, the wives and parents of those too many men who have been lost in action; in a curtain speech last evening he said that his play was dedicated to the next of kin of the country's casualties. Unfortuntely, Captain Nelson's play is not on the same plane with its purpose. It is overwritten and wordy, it sentimentalizes, and through overtrying for theatrical effect it loses dignity. It is not believable, it never can offer persuasion that it is not a contrived play on a subject that should be treated with simplicity and true feeling.

The characters are the wife, two children and the parents of a flier. In the first part of the first act they are seen waiting for his letters, wondering when he will return. He comes back as a spirit; he had been shot down on a mission, and the telegram from the War Department is to arrive in the morning. Accompanied by the spirit of a soldier of the first World War, he hopes to be able to break the shock for his family, to help them through. When they learn of his death, the members of the family all remember him in different ways. The wife recalls the courtship, the mother remembers the small boy. The soldier finds them thus separated in their recollections, until he tells them he will be there as long as they need him. They feel he still is with them and are comforted.

Captain Nelson's chief fault is in overwriting his dialogue and in overdoing his incidents. Some of the speeches are so clearly the result of painstaking preparation that they lose contact with normal human talk. Under emotion, average Americans do not express themselves like most of the characters of "The Wind Is Ninety"; instead of flowered phrases, they use simple words. A good many of the incidents could be shown to better advantage by suggestion rather than in the elaborate way Captain Nelson stresses them.

Wendell Corey plays the soldier, without giving any true feeling that here is the loved father, husband, son; nor does he manage the feeling that he has come to help them, although blindly groping for the way. Frances Reid is the wife, and plays it simply enough, and Bert Lytell and Blanche Yurka are the parents. Captain Nelson forces Mr. Lytell to be oversentimentally gruff and hearty. The nicest character, and the best played, is that of the soldier of the first war. He is honest, frank, amusing, and Kirk Douglas does him well. The two children are Joyce Van Patten and Donald Devlin. Frederick Fox has built a good setting for the fantasy which Albert de Courville—co-sponsor with the Shuberts—directed.

NEW YORK
HERALD-TRIBUNE
JUNE 22, 1945

But Not of Gale Force

By HOWARD BARNES

THE stiff dramatic problem of life after death is tackled by Captain Ralph Nelson in "The Wind Is Ninety." With the aid of stout performing, the new play at the Booth has interludes of moving intensity. It was no accident that it won the National Theater Conference playwriting contest. The author has the gift of blending stage trickery with eloquence. He has written passages, particularly in the second act of the production, which are calculated to be singularly evocative for any one whom death has touched in this or any other war. Unfortunately, his thesis of what might be termed a pragmatic immortality spills across the stage in a sprawling and sometimes maudlin fashion.

* * *

The disconcerting title refers to an east wind which aviators like to thing carries their innermost thoughts and feelings to those they love. In this instance a captain has been brought down by flak in the Pacific and tries to cushion the news of his death for his family. No less a guide than the Unknown Soldier leads him back to his home where he struggles to make the past a receptacle of the future. Captain Nelson has written with orbvious sincerity and sentiment. One only wishes that he had had something more to say in the course of three acts.

* * *

For his musings on death and eternity rarely achieve the tensile power of honest tragedy. The dead flyer's father has a speech or two about the progress of civilization which kindle the work briefly. The Unknown Soldier from the first global war delivers lines which touch the intellect as well as the heart. Too often Captain Nelson is merely underlinging and pointing up grief which will be more or less universal as long as men kill other men. In any case, he should be congratulated for taking on a man-size job of dramaturgy and making it absorbing.

* * *

The company at the Booth rises to the occasion at every turn. Blanche Yurka is superb as the dead captain's mother, underplaying the part to the point of perfection. Frances Reid is at turns radiant and stricken as the wife of the fellow killed in action and Kirk Douglas does an inspired job with the difficult role of the Unknown Soldier. Meanwhile, Wendell Corey gives an honest reading of the all-important ghost part and Bert Lytell, as the boy's father, Joyce Van Patten, Donald Devlin and Dickie Van Patten add fragments of human experience to a show which is human, even though rather stickily sentimental. "The Wind Is Ninety" is a good try. It doesn't quite come off.

NEW YORK SUN,
JUNE 22, 1945.

'The Wind Is Ninety,' War Drama by a Flyer, Has Premiere at Booth.

The war and all the heartbreak that can be wrapped up in one of those dreaded War Department telegrams were brought poignantly close to the Broadway scene last evening by Capt. Ralph Nelson of the Army Air Force as his three-act play, "The Wind Is Ninety," had its premiere at the Booth Theater.

In it, partly in fastasy, partly in action that is as matter of fact as a day of your own at home, he unfolds, with simplicity and tenderness, the story of another air-force man, Capt. Don Ritchie, Doc Ritchie's boy, who has crashed to his death overseas, and of the family who has been waiting for him to return.

As the play opens that little group, his mother and his dad, his wife and his children, a boy, eight, and a girl slightly older, have not yet learned of his fate. The flyer's one thought in death is to help them through the dark hours after they get the news. How he comes back to his old home, and, guided by an understanding doughboy a casualty from the war of twenty-five years ago, carries out his mission, and thereby saves himself from separation and loneliness is portrayed movingly, with deft flashes of humor, and with fine imagination by Capt. Nelson.

A while back this playwright-airman was attracting attention with a one-acter, "Mail Call," in a tourney put on by John Golden. Now in "The Wind Is Ninety" (a flyer's term for an east wind) Capt. Nelson has proven himself a writer for the stage to be reckoned with. Winner in a contest conducted by the National Theater Conference, the play has both depth and power and stands up well in the Broadway glare, despite a few uneven moments that are common to most first plays.

Albert de Courville, who with the Messrs. Shubert presented "The Wind Is Ninety," has done an excellent job of directing, and the play is blessed with some superb performances, too. In fact, the whole cast, juniors and elders both, acquits itself with merit. Wendell Corey shades the part of the dead flyer into reality skillfully, and Kirk Douglas links the worlds of life and death beautifully as the doughboy, making him distinctly an appealing and memorable figure.

Donald Devlin is a boy of eight to the life, both in joy and grief, and Joyce Van Patten adds to her youthful acting laurels as the sister. Nelson has kept the role of the flyer's mother somewhat in the background, but Blanche Yurka brings distinction to it as does Bert Lytell to that of the father. Frances Reid is definitely right as the widow.

Frederick Fox has provided an attractive view of a small town front yard as a fine background for a fine play.

HERRICK BROWN.

NEW YORK PM
JUNE 22, 1945

Ghosts Jinx Another Play

PM Reviews

—*Kronenberger*—

In *The Wind is Ninety*, a play in which the ghost of a dead flier seeks to communicate with and comfort his bereaved family, Capt. Nelson no doubt meant to preach faith and offer consolation. But I am pretty sure that his general idea was misguided, and I am quite certain that his particular treatment is all wrong. Capt. Nelson has not merely failed—as almost all playwrights fail—with a ghost. He has also failed with his living characters, who are sadly one-dimensional; with his tone, which is mawkish; with his touch, which is uncomfortably awkward; with his message, which lacks all emotional leverage, and seems just a matter of words. But he has failed most of all with the play itself—by virtue of the fact that it isn't a play. It is only a relentless, evening-long gnawing away at a single situation; a situation, moreover, that involves very personal emotion rather than human drama.

We are first shown Don Ritchie's family—his wife, parents and two small children—before they (or we) know that he has been killed; they talk about him, think about him, read aloud his latest letter. Then Don's ghost appears, accompanied by the ghost of the Unknown Soldier in World War I. The two hover about, unseen by Don's family, while we wait uneasily for the telltale wire from the State Department. It finally comes, and we watch each member of the family react, in turn, to the news—with Don trying helplessly to communicate with them. And afterwards he finds that they do not remember him as he is; his mother remembers him as a small boy, his father as a college freshman, his wife as the youth who proposed to her. But at last he reaches them telepathically; communication is established, he again becomes for them a living force.

But not for us. For us he is only a clumsy, ineffectual stage ghost; and worse than that, an intrusion upon a story that, if it must be told at all, should be told in terms of the living. Don's family could go through what they do, and end up having the feeling that they have, far better without his ghostly presence. But it is at least questionable whether such a story should be told at all in the theater; whether, in even the most expert hands, it could achieve the right esthetic balance or the right dramatic force. In any case, Capt. Nelson's hands are decidedly inexpert. He can only preach and prose, and indulge in emotional cliches of both dialogue and situation. He never manages to be moving because he never really manages to be interesting.

The Wind Is Ninety isn't an easy play to direct, but Mr. de Courville's direction only seems to emphasize what is static and sentimental in the script. The cast has little chance to distinguish itself. Given so little to project in the way of character, Wendell Corey, Frances Reid, Blanche Yurka, Bert Lytell and the rest perform throughout in a set and un-inward fashion.

—Louis Kronenberger

"Oh, Brother!"

NEW YORK TIMES
JUNE 20, 1945.

Brother, No!

By LEWIS NICHOLS

Some eighteen years ago, Hugh Herbert last appeared on Broadway in an event over which charity drew the veil of silence. Time, they say, moves in cycles. Last night Mr. Herbert came to the Royale in "Oh, Brother," a new comedy by Jacques Deval, and if charity had not gone away for the Summer, it again would draw the veil. The "woo-woo" trademark, renowned on the screen, deserves better; Mr. Herbert obviously would be very funny if someone in the legitimate theatre would give him a chance. Mr. Deval has not done so. To be abrupt about it, the author has offered him what even in the less rigorous days of June can be regarded as a pretty damned silly play. Mr. Herbert should cut his next absence to nine years and come in on the crest of the wave.

* * *

Mr. Herbert is a chess player who needs a thousand dollars in order to enter a tournament. Petty thievery brings him little profits so he evolves a vast scheme to palm off a young man as the missing heir to a fortune. The plot has possibilities, but Mr. Deval through inertia or caution steadfastly declines to do anything about it. Mr. Herbert clearly could be a fine combination of gentleman crook and chess player, but the author will not concentrate on his important character, preferring instead to see that the young folks are happy. The young folks are the pseudo heir and the sister of the missing man, who fall in love just as they do in the movies, and no doubt will again when "Oh, Brother" gets to the movies, and they are completely tiresome about it.

"Oh, Brother!" never decides what type of play it hopes to be when it grows up. At the beginning, it is of the quietly amiable school, then it forces its way into farce; finally it concludes by throwing practically the whole bottle of sentiment into the mixture. Mr. Deval has offered a few bright lines, but he has offered a great many more which fall as flat as a sheet of paper. Mr. Herbert does what he can by change of pace, by voice and gesture, but the events of the evening are too far out of his reach. Probably to stir warm June thoughts in the heart of the box-office, Mr. Deval has provided one scene where most of the feminine members of the cast appear in bathing suits. Arleen Whelan looks very cool and comfortable and no doubt it would be a distinct pleasure to see her swim some day—just as it would be a pleasure to see Mr. Herbert get himself a better job. Bretaigne Windust directed "Oh, Brother!" without distinction, thus keeping the evening on an even keel.

"OH, BROTHER!"

A comedy by Jacques Deval presented by Maximilian Becker and Peter Warren at the Royale Theater Tuesday evening, June 19, 1945. Staged by Bretaigne Windust. Setting designed by Samuel Leve. The cast:

Allen Kilmer	Don Gibson
Sue Atkins	Susana Garnett
Charles Craddock	Hugh Herbert
Ethel Shores	Eva Condon
Rose	Sally Archdeacon
Larry	Kendall Bryson
Marion Cosgrove	Arleen Whelan
Amelia Broadwell	Catherine Doucet
Steve Foley	Lois Bettger
Julian Trumbull	Forrest Orr
Connie Rawlins	Jutia Wolf
Joan Macauber	Gloria Stroock

NEW YORK
HERALD TRIBUNE
JUNE 20, 1945

Return of Hugh Herbert

By Otis L. Guernsey Jr.

SEVERAL able farceurs are performing in very thin material at the Royale. The Jacques Deval play entitled "Oh, Brother!" brings Hugh Herbert back to Broadway after an absence of eighteen years, but it is otherwise undistinguished. Based on a situation in which a trio of crooks introduces an imposter into a rich family as a long-lost brother, the script has neither the wit nor the pace to keep itself clicking. Most of the actors work hard to develop every ounce of humor, but they cannot contribute enough to turn the "Oh" in the title into an exclamation of pleasure.

Mr. Herbert is the motion-picture comedian of "woo-woo" fame; he is very much at ease on the stage as the leader of a plot to extract a few unwanted thousands from a wealthy Daytona Beach family. He has forsaken the most obvious tricks of his film performances, the exaggerated gestures and intonations, in order to give a more subtle characterization of a good-natured crook who is only trying to earn his way to the west coast to enter a world championship chess tournament. His scatterbrain professional personality is used to advantage as he muddles his way through the intricacies of the deceit, but it has been toned down to fit the requirements of the medium. There would be a hearty welcome mat out for him on Broadway, were his vehicle a match for his talents.

* * *

Once the play has established the reasonable facsimile of the wandering brother and his two accomplices in the stage home, it has very little to keep it going except sheer actor-power. The head of the house is an attractive young girl who welcomes her "brother" with open arms—he, of course, begins to feel anything but a brotherly affection for her. This complication and others which ensue are worked out in near-burlesque terms—there is almost no sparkle to the language, and so the frankly silly happenings begin to come out at the elbows.

Don Gibson as the phony brother exercises a force and a sense of timing that bring some of the moments to life, and Catherine Doucet is, as always, the personification of a flighty old aunt. Susana Garnett, as the third of the conspirators, is generally pleasant to have around, but occasionally a bit too ebullient, and Arleen Whelan, who is anything but an ideal sister, models a bathing suit adequately. On the whole, "Oh, Brother!" has been put on as well as could be expected, but the play doesn't match up to the hard work some of its collaborators have put into it.

NEW YORK SUN
JUNE 20, 1945.

Hugh Herbert Returns in 'Oh, Brother! a Dull Comedy at the Royale.

Hugh Herbert, who has long been busy woo-wooing his way through a string of film comedies, ended an eighteen-year truancy from the Broadway stage last evening. He came back into town as a featured player of "Oh, Brother!" which had its premiere at the Royale Theater under the sponsorship of a pair of newcomers to the producing field, Maximilian Becker and Peter Warren.

Unfortunately, the play which the Hollywood comedian is using as the vehicle for his return is far too wobbly a theatrical contrivance to make his re-entry gladsome. Jacques Deval, who wrote it, has proven in previous plays that he on occasion can provide an amusing evening for an audience. This time he has buried a good enough farce idea under such tons of involved plot and feeble dialogue as to squeeze all the laughter out of it. Having a middle-aged burglar, who is more interested in chess than in the fine art of looting, get tangled up in a long-lost brother swindle with a beautiful young woman as the victim might under some circumstances lead to considerable hilarity. Not as Deval works it out in "Oh, Brother" however.

Herbert, of course, is the crook, and as he hesitatingly fumbles his way steadily deeper into trouble, he manages now and then to arouse a few chuckles, but even he is engulfed by the whole dreary business before the finish. Arleen Whelan, co-featured with him, is the girl he is defrauding, but the author has made the heroine so silly as to waste Miss Whelan's talents. The rest of the cast didn't have any better luck than she did in instilling life into their cardboard roles.

Samuel Leve's setting depicting a Florida home is quite the most attractive part of the proceedings. "Oh, Brother!" will probably turn up some day as the lesser half of one of those film double features. All by itself on the Royale stage it misses badly. HERRICK BROWN.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
JUNE 20, 1945

Hugh Herbert in 'Oh, Brother!' Oh, Dear! Ah, Summer! Poo-Poo!

By JOHN CHAPMAN

If "Oh, Brother!" could have been produced last night at the Royale Theatre for 95 cents top, tax included, it might not have been a bad buy if you were trying to come in out of the rain. At $4.80, which was last night's price, or $3.60, from tonight on to maybe Saturday night, you get soaked worse indoors than outdoors.

For 95 cents you would get the following bargain, or stage show: Hugh Herbert, of the movies, who is just the way he is in the movies. He jiggles, he waves his hands in that grotesque fashion, he double-takes and he makes that noise. (The noise is, incidentally, more often "hoo-hoo" than "woo-woo.")

Arleen Whelan, a quite properly constructed red-head who is given a chance to wear four or five changes of costume, including two bathing suits. Of the two bathing suits, I liked best the black one with the white zipper on the behind.

Two other dishes in bathing suits.

Catherine Doucet, whose voice keeps reminding me of a girl dove trying to talk a boy dove out of a tree, if that is what doves do.

A setting by Samuel Leve of a room in Daytona Beach Fla., which is quite nice.

There are some more actors around, including Susana Garnett, who is rather sweet.

Thrown in, too, more or less at random, would be a plot about some crooks headed by Mr. Herbert who moves in on a rich family. I liked "Cheating Cheaters" better, but I was a young lad when that one came along and without doubt was gullible. Jacques Deval threw in the plot.

NEW YORK
WORLD-TELEGRAM
JUNE 20, 1945.

'Oh, Brother!' Oh, What a Turkey

By Burton Rascoe

They tell me that many people who are dedicating their lives to the art of the cinema are very bitter about the manner in which George S. Kaufman has caricatured them and their endeavors in "Hollywood Pinafore."

These aggrieved ones, I hear, say that Mr. Kaufman writes as an outsider, from hearsay, about conditions which may have existed, here and there, in Hollywood some 15 years ago, but that all that was wacky, absurd, extravagant, tasteless and incompetent about movies and movie people in the infancy of the industry has now been replaced by sober earnestness, thrift, competence, taste and deep devotion to the highest ideals of art and life.

I am an outsider myself, and Mr. Kaufman certainly needs no mouthpiece, nevertheless I offer in reply to Mr. Kaufman's critics, "Oh, Brother!" which opened at the Royale last night.

It's No Bargain.

This is a play in which a motion picture company has not only invested $10,000 outright in its Broadway production but has also bought the motion picture rights for a $75,000 down payment, with a maximum fee of $200,000 to be paid, according to the length of the run.

The play is absolute trash. It's garbage. It makes a terrific effort to be dirty and indecent but remains dreary, soporific and inept; it is mismamed a comedy, for there isn't a laugh in it except those produced by Hugh Herbert with the familiar means he uses in the movies; for the most part it is badly acted.

Starred in the play are Mr. Herbert and Arleen Whelan. Mr. Herbert has been in Hollywood, as a writer, director and actor, for 18 years—and he chooses a turkey like "Oh, Brother!" for his reappearance on the Broadway stage! . . . Hollywood must do something to the perspective and sense of value of people; for, in spite of his dim-wit roles in the movies, Mr. Herbert is an intelligent man, a seasoned showman and the author of about 150 playlets and vaudeville sketches.

Once Famous Writer.

The author of "Oh, Brother!" is Jacques Deval, who before he became a member of the literary chain-gang in Hollywood in 1936, was a distinguished French novelist, playwright and drama critic, whose plays, "Her Cardboard Lover" (adapted by P. G. Wodehouse in 1928 and played here by Jeanne Eagels and Leslie Howard), "Mademoiselle" (adapted and played by Grace George), and "Tovarich" (adapted by Robert E. Sherwood) were successes in Paris, London and New York. . . . He now writes like an understudy to the author of "School for Brides."

There seems, therefore, to be a flaw or two in Hollywood's perfection even nowadays.

The Plot.

"Oh, Brother!" is about a chess-player, a waif and an artist, all vagabonds, who burglarize an unoccupied house and discover that the heir of the property and of a fortune has been missing for many years. The artist is persuaded to pretend to be the missing heir. He falls in love with the girl who believes he is her brother. Most of the action has to do with his reactions to her sisterly familiarities with him and her innocent temptations to him to be unbrotherly. There is a bathing suit parade at one point in a desperate attempt to enliven the scene with displays of feminine nudity, but you see girls dressed almost that bare on subways now.

Susanna Garnett, who was so good in "Men to the Sea" and in the recent revival of "Little Women," was too good for her surroundings.

NEW YORK PM
JUNE 20, 1945

Oh, Brother! And a Woo-Woo

—*Kronenberger*

A good while back, when he wrote in French, Jacques Deval contrived such amusing plays as *Her Cardboard Lover* and *Tovarich*. Not so long ago, when he first took to writing in English, he came up with such an unintentionally amusing play as *Boudoir*, whose second act swam in dialogue like "Show the veterinary where he may wash his hands, Gaylord." But Mr. Deval's latest play is neither good enough—nor bad enough—to be funny; it's just a dull and silly rehandling of a venerable situation. Probably Mr. Deval put the finishing touches on *Oh, Brother!* a month ago Thursday; but it has the ring of something he composed in his Gallic youth under the title, say, of *Frere Jacques*.

It is, in brief, another impersonation farce. An amiable chess expert, turned burglar for the nonce, discovers while looting a mansion that the son of the house had run away when a boy and was last heard of in Venezuela. The chess master prevails upon a likeable and penniless young painter to impersonate the missing heir: all goes well, except that the impostor falls head over heels in love with his beautiful "sister." From there on the complications, whether of chicanery or romance, are both very predictable and very protracted. In the end, of course, love triumphs; possibly proving, at the same time, that crime pays.

Having fastened on this not very up-to-date plot, Mr. Deval is by no means up to scratch in developing it. He makes use of too many characters, and too stereotyped ones—crooked lawyers, gurgling widows, garrulous maids. He rather desperately drags out a number of scenes; he keeps falling back for laughs on lines with double meanings for those who are in on the imposture, and even resorts to references to *Forever Amber*. Hugh Herbert, forsaking the movies for the occasion, plays the chess expert in his familiar style and manages to be entertaining when the script permits; but the script is not very co-operative. Arlene Whelan makes a beautiful sister indeed, but she too has script trouble. Don Gibson tugs away at the impostor's role, but hard work is not the way to Heaven in *Oh, Brother!* About all that *Oh, Brother!* proves, in fact, is that June is here—a month when brides are happy, but McBride's is not.

—Louis Kronenberger

NEW YORK POST
JUNE 20, 1945

'Oh, Brother!' Opens—Yes, The Summer Season Is Here

By Wilella Waldorf

Jacques Deval's new comedy, "Oh, Brother!" produced last night at the Royale Theatre, concerns a penniless painter who bums his way from New York to Daytona Beach, Fla., falls in with a pair of amiable small-time crooks, and persuades them to pass him off as the wealthy Tracy Cosgrove, who ran away from home as a boy.

Tracy has a beautiful sister Marion, who insists upon treating the impostor like the brother she thinks he is. In her sisterly exuberance, she wears revealing bathing suits, dons fetchingly diaphanous evening robes and runs in and out of his room all night being palsy-walsy.

This is almost too much for the impostor, but not quite, since he is a perfect gentleman and under the necessity, besides, of keeping within the Hays Office Code, since "Oh, Brother!" we understand, is destined to be immortalized in celluloid by Paramount.

For a playwright who is not, after all, a beginner, Mr. Deval has a horrible time with his exposition in the first act. On the whole it might be easier if he had one of the actors set up a blackboard containing a few simple diagrams, including the Cosgrove family tree.

After the first act, it becomes painfully evident that the evening is to be devoted chiefly to the exceedingly tiresome efforts of the young man to control his libido, and although there is a bit of comedy relief supplied at intervals by Hugh Herbert, the woo-woo comedian from Hollywood, it isn't enough.

Poor Mr. Herbert, who is a funny fellow when he has half a chance, hasn't acted in a Broadway play in almost 18 years, having been busy out West appearing in no less than 125 pictures. He still can hardly be said to be in a Broadway play, for "Oh, Brother!" is just one of those incipient movies passing through en route to the Coast.

Arleen Whelan, also of the films, is a luscious looking girl, and not a bad actress either, if she had something to act. Don Gibson works himself into a lather as the phony brother and Susana Garnett is wasted as a little girl the playwright apparently liked rather well in the beginning but forgot as he went along.

New York Journal-American
June 20, 1945

'Oh, Brother!' Opens At Royale Theatre

By ROBERT GARLAND

Frankly, I ask you. When The Papers show up in the first act, The Bathing Beauties show up in the second act and Nothing Whatever shows up in the third act, what're you going to do? Don't ask me, you friendly, you frustrated first-nighters. Not even when Hugh Herbert, restless refugee from the West Coast studios, wavers and woo-woo-es his way through a trite and dry-ing evening.

In case you're interested, it's last night's first-night I've got in mind. "Oh, Brother!"

Last night's first-night is a theatrical misdemeanor fetched into the Royale by Maximilian Becker and Peter Warren, working hand in glove. Written by Jacques Deval, he of "Her Cardboard Lover," directed by Bretaigne Windust, he of "The Hasty Heart," designed by Samuel Leve, he of "It's a Gift," "Oh, Brother!" should have stood in bed and let you, me and the other fellow do likewise.

But it didn't, drat the luck! And, because it didn't, it made a lot of sensible people go out in the rain.

Plotless Plot

There's a plotless sort of plot set up and knocked down at the unrepentant Royale. You'll not believe it, just as no remaining soul believed it last night in 45th st. But, believe it or not, it dragged onward and downward in the face of an incredulous and, in spite of torrential rains outside, steadily diminishing congregation. Even inauspicious acting failed to stem its longevity.

There're three burglars, it seems. One is Allen. Another is Charlie. Still another is Sue.

Allen is burglarizing the furnished, but unoccupied, home of the crazy Cosgroves when Sue and Charlie arrive, imbued with the same idea. They join forces. Discovering The Papers in the briefcase in the attic, Allen impersonates the Cosgroves' long-lost heir, while Charlie and Sue impersonate the long-lost heir's aiders and abettors. This leads to a swimming hole in the parlor. And Nothing Whatever.

Even The Bathing Beauties, undressed like Gunga Din, help "Oh, Brother!" not at all. Least of all when one's named Stephen.

Actless Acting

The acting must be seen to be depreciated. From Hugh Herbert, who's the big burglar around Daytona Beach, to Gloria Stroock, who comes on just to take her clothes off, the mummery is mostly minus. Maybe, away out West where the sun sets in the ocean, Mr. Herbert's wavering and woo-woo-ing are what amusement seekers order. But they're flat and unfunny in 45th st.

The as yet unmentioned Bathing Beauties are, male and female, Jutta Wolf, Lyle Bettger and Arleen Whelan.

Incidentally, Miss Whelan is co-starred with Mr. Herbert. Apart from the use to which she puts her bathing suit, I can't see why Catherine Doucet, one of my favorite on-stage people, struggles hard against her lines. Susana Garnett, as the burglarizing Sue, has a face that is prettier than her voice. Forrest Orr is a lumbering lawyer. Kendall Bryson is an impassioned policeman.

And "Oh, Brother!" is the last and, I wouldn't be surprised, least offering of Spring, 1945. Let's hope Summer does better by us.